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Lebelo Proposes South African Military Contracting Reforms

by Barbara Honegger, Naval Postgraduate School Public Affairs Office

June 8, 2001

Some students come to the Naval Postgraduate School to learn how to build a new nation, and Peter Lebelo is one of them. In just a few days, the former anti-Apartheid freedom fighter will take the knowledge of how to make military contracting more effective and efficient back to the Republic of South Africa, and will leave an indelible impression on hundreds of colleagues and friends here at the Naval Postgraduate School. The first civilian with the Armament Corporation of South Africa (ARMSCOR) to attend NPS, under the State Department's IMET Program, Lebelo will receive a master of science degree in management with a specialization in acquisition and contract management during graduation ceremonies, June 21.

Lebelo is part of the 'best and brightest' cadre of anti-Apartheid freedom fighters close to the country's first minister of defense who struggled under the African National Congress (ANC) in exile, returned with the change of regime, and are receiving the advanced education to move into more responsible positions in the new government.

"The NPS course in management, under the Graduate School of Business and Public Policy, is very valuable," he noted. "I now feel I'm even ready to lead our corporation (ARMSCOR)."

"In South Africa, all military contracting is outsourced to a civilian government agency, ARMSCOR, where I am a program manager in the acquisitions department, specializing in telecommunications," said Lebelo. "With limits on funding, we're always looking for better ways to procure military systems, which is one of the reasons I'm here at NPS. I've studied the U.S. Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR) system and military-specific Defense Federal Acquisition Regulation Supplement (DFARS), as well as the defense acquisition systems of other first world nations, to see what we can use to build the best defense acquisition system for South Africa. I've learned how to buy equipment and services at the very best value and, just as important, to diversify and customize all types of contracts to fit the specific need and circumstance."

"For my thesis, I focused on contract risk reduction systems for military weapons procurement. In acquisitions, we usually know the requirements up front, but don't know that the final weapons product or system will fulfill them or will come in at or below cost. Both uncertainties produce risk, so I've studied the U.S. and other nations' military acquisition systems to learn how to minimize these risks, and developed a defense procurement model for my country."

"One of the major challenges we have in South Africa is that our military acquisition system only allows for fixed-price contracts, which increases the risk to contractors. We need a wider range of options to reduce this contractor risk because, if we don't, the contractor isn't happy and might not deliver, and that isn't good for either the government or the contractor."

“What I’ve done is to develop a contract model for thirteen types of contracts that can be applied to different circumstances -- for example, research and development for complex military systems, for incentivizing contractors, and for level-of-effort projects.”

Lebelo joined the ANC in 1977 and went into self-imposed exile two years later, in 1979. He attended high school in Tanzania at the ANC-built Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College, and received his master of science degree in electronic engineering from the High Institute of Electrical and Mechanical Engineering in Sofia, Bulgaria, in 1989. After Nelson Mandela’s release from prison in 1990 and subsequent negotiations with the Afrikaner regime, he was repatriated in 1993, one year before the fall of Apartheid.

“It was difficult to return to South Africa,” he recalled. “You didn’t just come back and start working. There weren’t jobs. So I volunteered doing whatever I could – as a teacher, and I was involved in the negotiations for the transition. I also helped other South Africans returning from exile adjust to the new nation, through the National Coordination Council for Repatriation.”

Lebelo was hired as an engineer with the German telecommunications giant Siemens Corp. before being asked to join ARMSCOR by ANC colleagues then in the office of the Republic’s first Minister of Defense, Joe Modise.

“The current leaders encouraged me to leave the private sector and come into the civilian government,” he said, “where they believed I could make a greater contribution.”

Prof. David Lamm, associate advisor for Lebelo’s thesis, agrees that the skills and knowledge he has gained at NPS will serve him well in his future career.

“Peter has been looking at the whole spectrum of contract types, which is very important and useful for ARMSCOR,” Lamm noted. “With the skills he’s developing through his masters program here, he will be well positioned to do on-the-job contracting training as well as potentially participate in future International Defense Acquisition Resource Management (IDARM) Mobile Education Trainings (METs) in South Africa.”

“NPS has been very valuable from a social perspective as well,” said Lebelo. “I’ve learned to integrate with officers from all over the world and especially appreciate the volunteer student sponsor system. From day one, my own student sponsor, Lt. Cmdr. Charles Joseph (“Joe”) Newbury, took me under his wings and helped me feel at home here in the U.S., and at NPS.”

“I’ve also contributed to the NPS culture,” Lebelo said with a clear sense of pride. “In my Communications Management course, we had to do a videotaped briefing and I chose intercultural communications as my topic. In that video, which Prof. James Suchan, the instructor, has now played over and over to every new class of officers, I explained the critical importance of greetings in the South African culture. Whenever you meet someone in my country, it is extremely important to greet him or her with the word “Saobona!” which translates literally “I see you” or, in other words, “I acknowledge you.” It is a vital sign of respect for the person, who responds with “Sikhona!” which translates “I am here” or “I exist.” It’s the order of the two that is so

important, because the person who is first greeted is literally 'called to life' by being so recognized."

"The officers attending the (videotaped) briefing were mesmerized by what Peter had to say (about the importance of greetings)," said Suchan. "Peter takes a seemingly simple concept and demonstrates and analyzes its importance and complexity. He focuses on one key idea and carefully develops it in a number of surprising ways. Peter's belief in the importance of the topic and his commitment to it engages the audience." Over the past year, Suchan has played the tape for subsequent classes of officer students, many from other countries, so the "Saobona!" greeting and cultural philosophy behind it is not only becoming well known across campus. It is being seeded around the world.

Lebelo's ARMSCOR colleague, Rakhee Ramgolam, is also a student at NPS, one quarter behind him. This fall, she will receive dual master of science degrees in management with a subspecialty in systems acquisition management, and in software engineering.

"The work covered in my courses is directly related to my job back home, which is project manager at ARMSCOR," said Ramgolam. "So, academically, I'm gaining great benefit from being at NPS. Even more important, though, is the education I'm gaining in 'the school of life' through interacting with international officers, including U.S. officers, and having the chance to live in the U.S. and really experience the American way of life. This is truly an incredible opportunity."